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Wendy McCredie

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# Academic Vocation: What the Lutheran University has to Offer

Wendy McCredie

The tension between bonds of particular love and a love which is open to every neighbor . . . cannot be overcome by any theory, however intricate. Our thinking can only warn against certain mistakes, certain wrong turnings which we might take. But this central problem of the Christian life must be lived, not just thought. —Gilbert Meilaender

## A Methodological Prologue

Faculty, students, and staff at the colleges, universities, and seminaries of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) live and work in the tension Gilbert Meilaender describes above. However, in spite of numerous attempts, those of us who care about the church-relatedness of our universities have not adequately articulated this tension to our students, to our constituencies, or even among ourselves. In fact, central claims in the Lutheran tradition forestall such an adequate articulation while simultaneously requiring its continued pursuit. Each of us who attempts such an articulation will do so from disciplinary and faith perspectives that will both neglect and supplement others' points. None of our articulations can stand alone, yet each of them coheres around a central dialogical<sup>1</sup> tension between the bonds of faith, on the one hand, and the openness and love faith inspires for others and for God's created world, on the other hand. What follows is one more attempt to articulate productively this dialogical tension and to suggest how it can promote practical and useful understandings of the vocation of the ELCA-related colleges and universities.

Because profession is intimately grounded confession, this essay begins with an outline of the determining features of my faith as it influences my thoughts. The next section moves away from personal confession to the communal concern about the future of the church-related college, and the last sections represent various dialogical engagements with that concern in a specifically Lutheran context. What I write here, I write as a practicing Lutheran and a trained literary scholar. Until very recently, I taught at a university with "Lutheran" in its name; I now work at the churchwide offices of the ELCA. From one perspective, therefore, I write from a position of insider privilege. From another perspective, my lack of formal theological training may raise questions about my authority. In any case, for a Lutheran who believes the church is *semper reformanda* and who is one among the "priesthood of all believers," any privilege associated with teaching at a Lutheran university simultaneously constitutes a responsibility. My privileged position requires a constant interrogation

of both my faith and the institutions that claim to nurture it. I am called to investigate both confessional and professional claims.

Being a Christian in the Lutheran tradition means that I have faith in Christ, in God's scandalous self-revelation—a self-revelation that transgresses and suspends God's own law. Christ, God Incarnate, transgresses the law that separated the divine from the human. Jesus Christ thus embodies paradox and invites dialogue between God and human. This faith in God's scandalous self-revelation in Christ motivates an attitude of service to that good God and love for my neighbor. My service is motivated by faith, and God's grace enables its efficacy.

From that attitude of service motivated by faith, reason helps determine what is faithful, what I might best do, here and now. This requirement or call to act is as universal as the gracious love to which it is a response. Always, however, I attempt to act with an attitude of humility, because I might be wrong. In fact, it is not only reason that discerns appropriate action; it is God's grace that allows for the possibility that I might be right in that discernment.

The recognition of the limitations of and on human reason may be the most difficult hurdle for scholars to overcome. To be called to employ human reason and to act in accordance with that reason, while simultaneously understanding that reason errs, seems quite silly, even foolish. If one uses the best tools, intellectual or otherwise, to solve a problem, it is quite difficult to act on that solution in good faith, while at the same time recognizing that those best tools might not be adequate to the project. Indeed, they might in fact have precluded the finding of the best solution. Such a paradox can lead to a paralysis that makes action in the world impossible.

How does one recover from such a paralysis, perhaps brought on by too much knowledge? Faith in God's grace makes it possible actually to do what I have reasoned I must do in order to promote goodness and justice, even though I know that whatever I do will not eliminate all injustice in the world; it may even

perpetuate some injustice that I did not recognize. Moreover, my witness to my faith, my evangelizing of the freedom it confers on me, is most true to itself when I respect the freedom of others. I am not trying to convert, to make little Lutherans of my colleagues or my students. I am working in service to God's words of hope for peace and justice. I do not condemn my colleagues who do not share the particularity of my beliefs; I listen hard to the challenges they present to me. I *struggle* with the ways in which I and the institution—both the church and the university—fall short of the ideal community, but I try to keep before me the gospel, the good news of forgiveness and redemption.

### **Why worry about our vocation, or calling, to be Lutheran colleges and universities?**

Like many church-related universities, Texas Lutheran University has struggled to articulate for itself and for others what its middle name might mean. What motivates this need to situate ourselves? Are we fearful of losing students, of not responding to the market, of ceasing to exist, of leaving the church, of becoming the church? Or is there something good we do that ought not to be lost? Are we motivated by fear or by love?

Since the publication of E. D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy*, Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, and William Bennett's *Book of Virtues*, there have been numerous fairly popular critiques of the American academy. These books, while at times simplistic in their analyses (perhaps precisely because of that simplicity), do resonant with an audience beyond what the public names the "ivory tower of academia." For that public, what we do in the universities remains esoteric, theoretical, valueless, and suspect.

For writers such as Hirsch, we are no longer teaching the right things, the things that will provide our students, when they are no longer our students, access to the world of the culturally elite. For Bloom and his followers, most of us, with the exception of a few enlightened political philosophers, are no longer teaching the right things. We are no longer doing so because we have succumbed to faddish movements such as Women's Studies, African-American Studies, and Gay and Lesbian Studies, all of which have a political agenda beyond the academy. All these intellectual and curricular movements pollute the purity of the academic endeavor by the importation of a tainted political agenda into what should be a purely intellectual endeavor. The syllabus is fragmented; the objectives unclear at best and politically motivated at worst; assessment procedures, even the right of professors to access students, come under attack as

imperialist tools; the complaints go on. Bennett's *Book of Virtues*, which is sold at supermarket checkouts as well as in university bookstores, elaborates the Bloomian and Hirschite themes by providing a list of virtues that will solve our problems if we could just get them back into the public arena; that is, teach them to our children.<sup>2</sup> Bennett's work does for K-12 what Bloom's and Hirsch's did for colleges and universities.

My characterization of these positions and the descriptions about where we have gone wrong and how we ought to fix it may be rather hasty and overly generalized, but the point is, they think we have gone wrong; there are a lot of folk who agree with them. Michael Bérubé and Cary Nelson sum up the situation of the 1990s this way:

The 1990s have not been kind to American institutions of higher education. Academy-bashing is now among the fastest-growing of major U.S. industries, and the charges are as numerous as the bashers themselves: teachers don't teach; scholars fritter away their time and your tax dollars on studies of music videos; campus regulations thwart free speech; the Western cultural heritage is besieged by tenured radicals; heterosexual white men are under attack from feminist, multiculturalist, and gay and lesbian groups; universities are buying luxury yachts with federal research dollars; academic standards of all kinds are in tatters; undergraduates lack both reading skills and moral foundations; and, in the midst of all this, to add financial insult to intellectual injury, college tuitions are skyrocketing. (Bérubé 1)

Bérubé and Nelson go on to document the shift from concern about political correctness in the academy to the attempt to define what it is that we should be teaching there. While Bloom and others lament the *type* of values taught in the academy, the latest move in the "culture wars" is to lament the *loss* of values in the academy. Bérubé and Nelson recognize this double movement as ironic. They summarize the character of the debates surrounding higher education as revolving around two contradictory statements: "[Higher education] has abandoned its mission by arrogantly seeking to shape student's moral and civic lives, and, worse still, it has abandoned its mission to shape students' moral and civic lives" (Bérubé 2). Bérubé and Nelson claim that while

faculty at large universities do inculcate values in their students, these values do not correspond to the values immediately conducive to the powerful corporate and governmental cultures pervasive outside the walls of academe. George Marsden, in *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*, also notes that neutral and objective perspectives on truth, while still touted as desired, are routinely shunned in the academy in favor of identity-driven perspectives. The point is that even in the large research universities value-free education has not been available; it's just that the values being taught are not the values the secular world seems to require. In this respect the large universities and smaller, church-related universities resemble each other. For, with some exceptions, church-related colleges and universities in the Christian tradition claim that gospel-centered values also challenge the apparently selfish and self-serving principles of the capitalist marketplace and the corporate boardroom.

So, whether we agree with Indiana University's Bérubé and Nelson or George Marsden on all counts, their claims that universities *are* inculcating values in the students warrant our close attention. Bérubé and Nelson's additional statistics on class size and teaching loads of professors in the liberal arts at public institution should also cause us to ponder what truly is the difference between Indiana University and places like Texas Lutheran University. For, in the admissions propaganda from small liberal arts colleges across the United States, the claims of small class size and individual attention from professors resound. However, if an account of large research universities can show that they too can offer such things, then where will our niche be? Are we really needed? What claims can we make for a unique educational experience? What rationale can we produce to justify our vocation as a Lutheran institution?

As a Lutheran institution, we would betray our heritage if we were to become a fundamentalist "Bible" college, although we might find a significant clientele for such a college, especially in some regions of the country. We would likewise betray our heritage were we to become a generic liberal arts college, more or less like any other in the nation. The only option, it seems to me, is to establish for ourselves and for the general public what is distinctively Lutheran about us and why that distinctively Lutheran character is appropriate, perhaps even necessary, in the current pluralistic cultural and academic climate. Why are we called to be the kinds of institutions we are?

### **Confusion between the exigencies of the secular and the centrality of the sacred**

The modern university, while we think of it as a development of the medieval monastic tradition, and certainly Lutheran education must trace its roots to this tradition, also has significant roots in the agora, the open marketplace, of Athens. Jaroslav Pelikan, states: "Although the ancestors of the modern university are multiple and complex, including as they do the seats of learning in many ancient cultures, there is no denying that the university has deep roots also in the monastery and the church. Indeed, . . . the medieval university was the foundation of the university as we know it . . ." (Pelikan 45). The twentieth century university provides both a contemplative place and one connected with the public space of the market and politics. Both the retiring, private scholar or the scientist who spends hours on end in the laboratory, and the public intellectual who views him or herself as duty-bound to change society for the better, find a conducive home in the academy. Our profession has no pre-established borders that define for us whether we are engaged more properly in a public, shared enterprise with, perhaps, certain responsibilities to established authority in the public domain, or whether our proper area of concern should be that of individual intellectual and ethical development.

George Marsden's works, especially *The Soul of the American University*, provide an interesting analysis of the role of the American university in training (for the marketplace) and educating (with an eye to spiritual formation) its future leaders. His emphasis is on higher education's public role. He identifies the post-Civil War era as the site of a decisive shift in higher education's goals. The North, having won the military victory, in large part because of its superior technological and industrial power, could also claim a moral victory. Moral and technological progress were linked; the land-grant colleges were set up to initiate students into the practical and technological mysteries of modern industrial society; and the Eastern establishment universities began to move beyond their missions as simply training grounds for the clergy. They became the forerunners of the modern research university and began the disciplinary specialization we take for granted, and sometimes resist.

Mark Schwehn's book *Exiles in Eden* analyzes the historical and cultural roots of the currently specialized disciplines. He suggests that the American research university modeled itself after the German universities

and especially after Max Weber's ideas on what properly constituted studies at the university. That is, in the university academics aimed for "mastery of the world through calculation and control" (Schwehn 58). Each academic discipline had its appropriate tools with which to fashion its understanding of the world. Weber's disciplined scholarly activity no longer has as a goal the *universitas*; the education of the whole person is not the goal, for questions of ultimate meaning have no place in Weber's academy. However, Weber's language imports to his severely pruned disciplines the moral discourse of the Puritans and provides added impetus for the liberal Protestant movement on the American academic scene.

In the United States, the language that heretofore had been used primarily to describe spiritual as well as intellectual enlightenment was divorced from the realm of the spirit. It applied exclusively to the life of the mind. While Marsden identifies the roots of the disassociation of religion and the life of the mind in American nineteenth-century liberal progressive Protestantism, Schwehn contends that this disassociation owes at least as much to Weber's two works "Science as a Vocation" and *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Marsden 3-21). Weber's call to the German universities to pare all ultimate questions from the core of verifiable knowledge and the progressive Protestant ethic collude in applying the language of faith to the knowledge of the world. The results are twofold. First, certain disciplines, notably the natural sciences, whose methodologies resonate deeply with this call for particular, verifiable, and practical knowledge, come to the fore. Second, the university, as a locus of knowledge, substitutes for the church, as a locus of faith. Instead of faith motivating one's life in meaningful ways, knowledge provides a justification for action aimed primarily at obtaining practical results, verifiable and meaningful in precisely the same way to everyone.

In *The Idea of the University: A Reexamination*, Jaroslav Pelikan recognizes the temptation to treat the university in the guise of mother of the soul, as an *alma mater*:

Because I have been disappointed so often in institutional Christendom and because, by contrast, the university has been for almost half a century the chief repository of truth and the community of wisdom to me personally, and is . . . my spiritual mother who has reared and nourished me, . . . I have sometimes been in danger of regarding it as the embodiment of the One Holy catholic and Apostolic church affirmed in the

Nicene Creed. It is not that; and if we act as though it were, we shall send a charge through the wires that the wires cannot carry, ending in idolatry or disaster. (Pelikan 66-67)

The university culture forms Pelikan's core beliefs as it does most academics'. We, like Pelikan, are products of a university system that speaks of its mission to educate, its moral responsibility to inculcate virtues in its students, and its expectation that society's leaders come from its halls. Even in the state universities, according to Marsden, there is no question that the mission of the university or college as an institution of higher learning and research is consonant with the nineteenth-century liberal progressive mission of Christianity:

Although self-conscious secularism is a significant force in academic communities, its strength has been vastly amplified by the convergence of . . . other forces . . . Liberal Protestantism opposed traditional Christian exclusivism and helped rule it out of bounds. Methodological secularization provided a non-controversial rationale for such a move, reinforced by beliefs concerning the universal dictates of science. Concerns about pluralism and justice supplied a moral rationale. Moreover, to all these forces can be added one . . . , the widely held popular belief, sometimes suggested in the courts but not yet consistently applied, that government funding excludes any religious teaching. (Marsden 34)

Marsden's point is that the "secularization" of the university is a relatively recent phenomenon and, while in its beginning stages it was motivated by a Liberal Protestant ethic that had gone mostly unchallenged in the United States, it was undergirded by a belief in the saving power of the modern way of life, as exemplified, naturally, by the American experience.

After World War II, university scholars begin to challenge the modern agenda set by Descartes and elaborated by the 18th century Enlightenment philosophers. Foundationalism, rationalism and empiricism were themselves identified as biases. Stephen Toulmin, in his remarkable book *Cosmopolis*, identifies a double beginning for this modern era. The first moderns, argues Toulmin, are the Renaissance men

(and women?) of the 16th century. The Renaissance humanist tradition of Montaigne, Shakespeare, Erasmus, Luther and Rabelais ushers in the modern age. Descartes and the others react to that prior pluralistic tradition. Toulmin's work suggests, in what is no longer such a surprising move, that Descartes' desire for some certain ground from which all knowledge would follow, and would therefore be equally as certain as its ground, derived in no small measure from his historical and personal context. In a chaotic world dominated by political instability, religious conflict, and seemingly endless wars that did little to reestablish order, what could be more seductive than a theory or a perspective that would enable its holder to reestablish order with its application?

Toulmin argues that Descartes' reductive philosophy constitutes a reaction to the humanistic impulse of the previous century. He wanted answers for all situations, not perspectives based on individual experience that might have been different if the experiences had differed. Descartes wanted a solid foundation for truth claims. At its root, Toulmin suggests, the rationalist project is *not* purely rational; it is embedded in the social and political particularities of Europe in the 16th and early 17th centuries, and the desire for social, economic, political and theological order that continues to be expressed through the 20th century. The Enlightenment dream of a universal human truth, determined by rational thought and divorced from particular contingencies, proves just that—a dream.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps it is even a nightmare.

In the current academic climate, some still cling to the Enlightenment's rational dream. Most, however, recognize the inadvisability, if not the impossibility, of pursuing its ends. However, the privileged spokespersons for public political and cultural agenda, the *polis*, and the marketplace, the *agora*, still call for universalizable virtues that we can all agree on no matter who we are or where we come from. We need these virtues, so the argument goes, in order to "get down to business." It is all very well for privileged university professors to argue about the contingencies of truth, about moral and factual relativism, about the inability to ever completely and objectively know something, but the rest of America has work to do! Hence, I would suggest, the rise of Christian fundamentalism, of biblical literalism, and of unthoughtful recourse to authority and a tradition (mis)understood as static. The academy, naturally (and appropriately), objects. And so should Lutherans.

## What the Lutheran University has to offer

Lutherans should object, and have been objecting albeit quietly, since the first Lutheran college opened its doors. Our educational system is grounded in that Renaissance of the sixteenth century and the advances of the ensuing centuries inform it. But at the core of an education in the Lutheran tradition are the affirmation of the human being in this world, God's creation, and a simultaneous affirmation of our essential connection with the kingdom of God. Thus, at the core of Lutheran education there is a recognized and theologically complex tension between the sacred and the secular. In his book *Lutheran Higher Education*, Ernest Simmons asserts that "a sharp line between the sacred and the secular cannot be drawn for the Lutheran tradition" (33). The public space of politics and the marketplace must not be divorced from the spiritual and intellectual tradition of the monastery. Indeed, scholars at Lutheran-related colleges, universities, and seminaries ought to respond to the exigencies of the secular without losing sight of the centrality of the sacred. "The academic institutions of the church, colleges and seminaries, carry special responsibility . . . as frontier places for the engagement of Word and world" (Simmons 29). It is our responsibility to put the sacred and the secular in conversation with one another.

In *Models for Christian Higher Education*, Richard Hughes identifies as distinctive the Lutheran affirmation of *human* being. We delight in our humanity even as we recognize that humans are not perfect. While we are *in* the world (and we love it, for it is God's creation and a gift), we understand our world to be limited and are inspired by what is beyond this world. This inspiration of the kingdom of God helps us to critically assess the created world that we so enjoy and to recognize its imperfections along with its joys.

The Lutheran tradition delights in discovery and exploration of this world, even as those discoveries might lead us to despair of the human propensity for destruction and other evils. These discoveries may also sow doubt and can lead to the loss of faith. On the other hand, such doubt can also lead to a greater awareness of God's infinite grace and a subsequent strengthening of faith. Because we live in *this* world, there are, however, no guarantees that we will experience the latter strengthening rather than the former loss. This uncertainty is a mark of our humanity. If we never risk the loss of faith, we risk intellectual and spiritual stagnation; we betray our God-given nature.

Born out of the monastic university tradition, the Lutheran faith tradition is one grounded in the search for knowledge and the understanding of how best to use that knowledge to serve our neighbor and honor our gracious God. Our mission in the universities is to continue to serve the church and to make knowledge accessible to all—not just to a privileged few who read the required language. We educate in the language of the people, for Luther believed God’s truth should be available to all in a language they could understand. Hence, all should learn to read and God’s word should be translated from Latin into German and other vernaculars. Our universities participate in this on-going mission to educate. Not all our students will be Christians (the privileged class in our contemporary American setting), but all should have access to knowledge. Without knowledge, how can one take care of and participate well in God’s created world?

As Lutheran tradition resists an easy separation of the sacred from the secular, so it resists the collapse of the two. The tension between God’s kingdom and this world remains unresolved. This lack of resolution makes possible continued dialogue. We do not have all the answers, but we have God’s assurance that not having all the answers, living with paradoxes, ambiguities, and pluralism is part of what it means to be human. Our job is to use the gifts from God in order to do the best job possible here and now, in this world. Just as our relationship with God is unmediated by any human authority, just as that relationship with Christ is an individual responsibility sustained by and within the context of a faith community, so our relationship with knowledge must be an individual responsibility. The primary community in which that relationship to knowledge is developed and sustained is the academic community. The Lutheran universities, and one hopes the Lutheran church and its congregations, recognize the ways in which our faith in God and our knowledge of the world are intricately linked. In an age as uncertain and as violent as Descartes’ century, will we succumb to temptation and attempt easy resolutions? Will we give in to the demands of political correctness of whatever ilk or to market pressures? If we do so, we betray our Lutheran tradition that calls us to live in the fallen human world that is nevertheless a gift from God and to be enjoyed and sustained. We must respond to God’s redeeming grace by leading lives “of grace-filled freedom and loving service, or joyful hope and commitment” (Simmons 26).

### **Practical considerations for the future**

Obviously, in a society as pluralistic as ours, we *must* ask ourselves, “How can we make our universities open to others and still maintain our uniqueness as Lutheran

colleges?” Some church-related colleges and universities respond to this question by bracketing it: The others do not belong to this community; non-Christians need not apply. If there are no others to include, the question of inclusivity is moot. This attitude betrays the insights of the modern era; it also betrays Luther’s understanding of the two kingdoms and his call to us to ask difficult questions. “[T]he Christian is called to make common cause with all people, including those of other faiths, in providing for a just and healthy world” (Simmons 27).

Currently, spiritual and moral education are affirmed “add-ons” to the primary academic mission of the university, even at institutions that have a close relation with their church bodies.<sup>4</sup> Many of the ELCA colleges and universities would fall, or almost fall, into this description. The spiritual is relegated to the realm of the extra-curricular and housed in campus ministry and the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and some other student groups whose spiritual lives are fulfilled through participation in these extra-curricular activities. When we are teaching in the liberal arts university and our goal is integrated knowledge and development of the whole person, then the add-on approach is inappropriate. To eliminate my Lutheran Christian perspective from my teaching amounts to an intellectual and spiritual dishonesty that should not be tolerated. Any attempt to excise reference to Christian (or any other) particularity from our classrooms, our offices, or our scholarship does a disservice to our colleagues and ourselves.

Alisdair MacIntyre suggests that the university is the site of “constrained disagreement.” In order to participate in this constrained disagreement, students deserve to have as many avenues to truth as possible opened to them. Likewise, colleagues can only effectively engage each other’s ideas if those ideas are shared in good faith. Since we live in the tension between God’s created world and God’s divine kingdom, if we neglect one or the other, we are liable to arrest the dialogue not only between the two kingdoms, but also between teacher and student and among colleagues.

Putting the Christian agenda on the academic table is risky. To engage in discussion in good faith, one must be willing to listen well to the other side. Nicholas Wolterstorff says poignantly,

Whereas for a long time now it has been the calling of the Christian scholar to emphasize that Christianity offers a distinctive perspective on reality, the time may be coming when it will be at

least as important to emphasize our shared humanity and the importance of mutual listening. If what emerges from the overthrow of the hegemony of Eurocentric bourgeois white males is not speaking and listening in dialogue but hard-of-hearing multiple power constellations, then nothing has been gained. (Wolterstorff 26)

We cannot take this caution too seriously, and we must realize that in entering the conversation, we agree to listen as part of our responsible participation. Indeed, our Christianity itself mandates this listening.

A theology of the cross requires us to be loving members of the community; it requires us to listen to those who are marginalized by, because, of, or in spite of the community. In such listening, we embody the faithfulness to God's love that Jesus embodied when he listened to the Galilean woman, when he spoke with the Samaritan woman at the well, when he affirmed the listening woman, Mary. At all these times, he rebuked his disciples for a too narrow interpretation of his mission; he rebuked them for their reliance on the law which he scandalously transgressed. Christ is the embodiment of transgression that mitigates all human transgressions. We cannot mitigate transgression; only God can. Likewise, we cannot know with certainty what does not transgress, what is right under the law; what is true in the Richard Rorty's sense of truth.<sup>5</sup>

In the world of empirical proofs and inductive reasoning, we cannot get to God. However, God's resistance to rational thought (or vice versa) does not mean that it is unreasonable to believe in God or to believe in a particular self-revelation of God's self. In my case, I do believe in God. I experience God's presence in my life. I cannot prove that God touches my life; but no one can prove that God does not do so. Now having said that God is present in my life, let me also say that there are many times when I doubt whether I should believe. Some would claim that this doubt disqualifies me from claiming belief. I am, however, reassured by doubting Thomas—just the last instance of a disciple having to be shown that Christ's truth exceeds a limited legalistic understanding of the truth—and by my belief in God's abiding love for me; even when I doubt, God remains. Thus, here I am back in the web of my belief. Wolterstorff affirms that entanglement, as do I, as an appropriate perspective from which to engage in both research and teaching. It is an entanglement informed by both faith and doubt. I doubt that I, or anyone else who

claims to, have the whole truth, the answer, the right that ends all wrongs, but I might and s/he might.

In our teaching, in our collegial relationships, etc., we must therefore *listen* to the narratives of others, including those outside the Christian, outside the Lutheran tradition. Those traditions, as we articulate them in human languages, constitute the law. We respect the authority of the law, but live in the light of the gospel. All human institutions will fall short of the mark. In choosing to work within the Lutheran tradition, we recognize that both institutions and individuals fall short of the mark for which we aim. This is *harmatia*, which is translated in the Bible as sin and in Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics as missing the mark (of virtue). Recognizing that we all miss the mark of truth or virtue or justice does not excuse any of us from continuing to try to hit that mark. Trying to hit that mark constitutes our faithfulness to God's self-revelation in Christ Jesus. The recognition that we will miss the mark sows in us humility or at least it ought to.

### **Pedagogical and theological dialogues**

I am faced with proclaiming my Lutheranness within the context of a Lutheran institution. It is the privileged position. I cannot claim that my voiced perspective is equal among the many I know are represented at our universities. In addition, a Christian perspective has been, and in some circles continues to be, associated with Eurocentric imperialism, patriarchy, racism, etc. It has sustained many bad things. Now, I claim that the Lutheran tradition has something good and vital to teach me and my colleagues who choose to work in institutions affiliated with the Lutheran tradition. I can make this claim because of the intellectual complexity of Lutheran theology and its insistence on dialogue.

In *Exiles from Eden*, Schwehn suggests we reformulate our goals so that we recognize our quest as a communal one for integrated understanding, not an individual one for isolated certainty:

Instead of Weberian *mastery* of the world through calculation and control, academics ought primarily to seek understanding of the world through communal inquiry. This latter endeavor follows quite naturally from the affections of awe, wonder, and gratitude that together constitute piety. Finally, the means-end rationality that defined the academic mind for Weber must be absorbed into a far more capacious



epistemology that views qualities of character, mind and spirit as integrally related to one another. (Schwehn 58)

Likewise, a few years ago, Richard Hughes reminded the Lutheran college and university presidents that Lutheran theology insists on human finitude. Because of this insistence, "Lutherans can never absolutize their own perspectives, even their theological perspectives" (Hughes 6). In academe, our perspectives are determined not only by the particularities of history, but also by our training and disciplinary interests. If we are to remain true to the Lutheran tradition, these disciplinary perspectives can never be absolutized. Since the practitioners in each discipline participate in the quest for understanding, we must remain in dialogue with each other, not isolated in self-referential and self-congratulatory niches of truth.

In the classroom, we must demonstrate an approach to knowledge that eschews any rigid adherence to a set of preestablished methodologies. As educators in a Lutheran university environment, we are called to interdisciplinary approaches, recognizing the limiting and limited nature of a single discipline's approach to and effect on the truth. In addition, within our disciplines we are called to take advantage of multiple approaches and to continue to modify our approach to the subject matter proper to the discipline itself.

There is no such thing as a neutral perspective. All truth claims are founded on some perspectival assumption. Even the claim that there is a truth devoid of particularity can only make sense in the context of a system that desires a universal, generically human truth; i.e., a truth that is true for all human beings at all times and in all places. This was the project of the Enlightenment. It has failed, but we should not, therefore, turn to nihilism.

As a teacher, I must be aware of the power and authority I have, justified only by my position and preparation (not by God's grace). Even though I know that I might be wrong, my students will not know that; in some cases, they will not *want* to know that. My work is similar to that of any pastor. I am not a priest who mediates between her students and the truth. I do not hold the keys to the Kingdom; Christ does, my students do. In theological terms, our students have as much access to Christ, Truth, and knowledge as we do. We need to show them that they do have this access, remind them of it in the Platonic sense. Our situation is similar to Luther's. When he traveled to country congregations, he was appalled by their lack of knowledge about the basic tenets of Christianity. The result: Luther's Small Catechism.

He did not set himself up as the authority who could teach others the right way to truth; he gave them the means to teach themselves. He did not condemn them for their ignorance, but facilitated their understanding. He gave them the means by which they could take personal responsibility for their relationship to God. We must provide the means to facilitate such relationships for our students in regards to truth and knowledge as well as to God. This is the Lutheran "priesthood of all believers" implemented in the classroom.

Finally, the Lutheran church is a reforming church. It has not been reformed (past perfect), but is reforming (present progressive). As a member of the church at one of its universities, I investigate possible areas of reform. I am responsible for communicating to the church the view from the outside and modeling for the church how to engage in conversation with those outside the tradition. I may not do it very well, but I keep trying. Jesus is my model. He spoke to the woman at the well—unclean, adulteress, unbeliever, a person unacceptable under the law of Jesus' tradition. It was she to whom he first revealed himself. I must listen to those outside the tradition because God's work is not done just by people of the tradition. In fact, the lure of worldly wisdom can be so strong that sometimes little of God's work can be done; God's words are not heard; God's love is not experienced when we allow the constraining laws of the created world to override the Gospel of good news and loving kindness and God's infinite grace.

This Lutheran understanding of ongoing reformation is essential to my teaching. Recognizing that my education (in French, my *formation*) is not past, nor perfect, I am freed from the need to be a perfect teacher, always right and in control at all times. I freely recognize my own fallibility and am thereby freed to listen to students' perspectives. I am freed to try new pedagogical approaches. And, most importantly, I am freed to critique myself and hear the criticisms of others, without those criticisms destroying me or my teaching. Essentially, I am freed from hegemonic claims by the one claim of Christ, and once again affirm the paradoxical situation of being in the world and simultaneously of the kingdom of God.

Those of my colleagues who are not Christian and those who are Christian and not Lutheran and who work alongside Lutherans in the Lutheran universities and colleges do so because in large measure they share the concern for justice and for the non-judgmental search for truth. This concern, however, is neither exclusively Christian nor perhaps even particularly Lutheran. Many of them would claim, like me, that they engage in action

for the sake of love and justice for our neighbors. It is this commitment to non-judgmental understanding that promotes action for the sake of love and justice that unites us. It is we who embody both individually *and* collectively the Lutheran tradition. And, as with all embodiments, except the one in Christ, we fall short of the virtuous marks at which we aim. We sin. However,

we live in the world in which the one perfect incarnation of truth was made possible through God's incomprehensible, infinite graciousness. This incarnation of truth simultaneously embodies the transgression of the law *and* continues to inspire, motivate and justify our imperfect aspiring embodiments of God's truth in the world.

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*Wendy McCredie is the associate director for interpretation in the Department for Communication at the ELCA churchwide office in Chicago.*

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> I have chosen this term primarily because "dialectic" has, unfortunately, come to have connotations of conflict that must be resolved through the sublation of one argument into another more comprehensive logic. "Dialogic," on the other hand, retains the sense of simultaneously unresolved *and* motivating logical movements. See Mikhail Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination*.

<sup>2</sup> Two centuries ago, Benjamin Franklin also enumerated the virtues necessary for good living. His *Autobiography*, however, ironizes an unthoughtful, blinkered approach to virtues and demonstrates that one virtue may contradict another.

<sup>3</sup> See Richard Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* for an elaboration on the contingency of truth.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Beaty, "Perspectivalism and its Cultured Despisers," Baylor University, 15 July 1996, given as part of the Lilly Fellows Summer Seminar.

<sup>5</sup> "Truth is a property of linguistic entities, of sentences." *Contingency*, p. 7.